



Christian People or a CHRISTIAN NATION?

A conversation with **Gregory A. Boyd** | BOB SMIETANA

Did Jesus really know what he was talking about when he told his followers to love their enemies? Or was he giving well-meaning but impractical advice?

That's the central question raised in *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church*, the controversial new book by Gregory A. Boyd. In his book, Boyd says that American Christians—both liberal and conservative—worry too much about how to force other people to accept their view of political issues. Instead of living out the values of the kingdom of God, he says, they worry too much about the kingdom of this world.

When he is asked to give the “Christian” response to any political problem, Boyd always gives the same answer: “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1-2, TNIV).

Instead of trying to straighten out

the world’s problems, he believes that Christians need to focus on loving and serving their neighbor and let God worry about the rest.

Boyd’s refusal to get involved in partisan politics has brought him both acclaim and scorn. His congregation, Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, lost 1,000 people in 2005 after Boyd preached a sermon series entitled “The Sword and the Cross.” (Since that time, more than 1,000 new people have come to the church.) Boyd was recently the subject of a front-page story in *The New York Times*.

Features editor Bob Smietana spoke with Boyd earlier this year about God, politics, and whether the United States could ever be a Christian nation.

How would you define a Christian nation?

I’m not even sure what the word “Christian” means in that context. But if it means “Christlike,” which is what the word is supposed to mean, then America is not a Christian nation, it never has been one, and it never can be one. Sometimes people mean that

America has a Judeo-Christian heritage of some sort—and I address that in the book.

The problem with that definition is we risk equating the civic religion of America—which has been a theistic form of Christianity, a quasi-Christian worldview—with the real thing. We risk that believers themselves will equate the civic religion with the kingdom of God.

It seems that some of the polarization we’re experiencing in the United States comes from the eroding of that civic religion—that we no longer have consensus about that Judeo-Christian tradition.

That goes a long way in explaining some—not all—but some of the consternation that conservative Christians have today. If you equate this civic religion with the real thing, then you are losing the real thing when you lose the civic religion. So now you will define your mission as retaining, protecting, or getting back the civic religion. ➤

Bob Smietana is features editor for the *Companion*.

One response to the change in civic religion is “let’s take back America for God.” What’s your alternative to that?

You can’t make everyone do what you want. If you are talking from a distinctly kingdom perspective, the idea of making people do what you want would never occur to you. We can debate laws and policies—but none of those can get us any closer to what the kingdom does. The kingdom isn’t about getting people to act a certain way. It’s about bringing about a transformation in people’s lives and therefore in society, because society is simply the whole of individual lives—but you do it in a distinct kingdom way. Instead of controlling the behavior, you are serving, you are dying for others, bleeding for them.

The temptation in politics seems to be to try to achieve God’s ends by some other means.

The word “temptation” is an appropriate one. I really do think it is a temptation. It is identical to the temptation that was given to Jesus by Satan: “You want all the nations—I’ll give them to you. But of course, that means you’ve got to bow and worship me.”

Another way of looking at that passage is this: you’ve got to do it my way. Jesus said, that’s not what I am about. I am going to get the nations, but not that way. I am going the long and arduous route of the cross.

In the book, you spend a lot of time talking about the problems with just war theory. What do you think is unchristian about St. Augustine’s idea of a “just war”?

There is a huge gulf between the kind of kingdom ethics that Jesus teaches and what Augustine taught about. As kingdom people our one job, according to Ephesians 5:1-2, is to mimic God—to be imitators of God and to live in love as Christ loved us.

Jesus says love your enemies, love those who persecute you, do good to those who spitefully use you. August-

“... we risk equating the civic religion of America—which has been a theistic form of Christianity, a quasi-Christian worldview—with the real thing.”

tine completely reinterprets all those things with this “just war” policy. That policy says you love your enemies except in certain instances; which turn out to be when it’s not practical to do so. So practicality trumps obedience to Jesus. I would just ask, “Where do we find a just war exception clause in the teachings of Jesus?”

If you believe that God created all people, that Jesus died for all people, and a significant number of innocent lives are being taken—say in Rwanda or Sudan—don’t we have a responsibility to act?

I understand that practical considerations would lead you to say we should pick up the sword and do something about this. I understand that. But I don’t believe that our kingdom call is to run the world or to have the practical solutions for the world. We certainly should ask what we as kingdom people can do for Sudan and Rwanda. But I don’t think what we do should be defined by the terms that the kingdom of the world plays with.

From a kingdom perspective—taking our marching orders from Jesus not Caesar—it seems to me that we need to see that violence is never a solution. I know there are a lot of people who would disagree with that.

It is always appropriate to lay down your life for another; but to lay down someone else’s life to achieve a greater end—I seriously question whether that is ever a kingdom action.

Is Caesar versus Jesus an appropriate way to think of these questions? Can we take the first-century teaching about Caesar out of that

context and apply it now, without thinking about what it means now, in a different context?

By Caesar, I simply mean, power to run things, the power to rule. In some kingdoms of the world, the populous is invited in on that process. In other versions of the kingdom of the world, the populous is not part of that process. But the process itself is a Caesar process—who gets to decide how things are run here, what things are lived by, what laws are enforced? In a democracy, which I am all in favor of, they ask, “What is your opinion?” and we get to give it. But just don’t think that the power to run things is our unique kingdom power. I don’t think our unique authority as kingdom people can be given or taken by Caesar.

Should Christians stay out of politics?

Christians have to pray and follow God’s leading. If you vote, then you vote your beliefs and conscience. But that is not a unique Christian idea. Sometimes I think Christians assume that the only people who have faith and values are Christians. Everybody votes their faith and values. So vote based on what you believe and the values you hold. But don’t think that somehow you’ve got the Christian answer to all the world’s problems.

Don’t we still have to wrestle with the difference between our time and the first century? The earliest Christians didn’t have the chance to influence the world’s politics—and we do have that chance.

The minute you give any importance to that question, you are now on the road to practicality, and it will do nothing but distract you from the kingdom of God.

But don’t we interpret all Scripture by asking what did it mean then and what does it mean now? It’s a hermeneutical question.

The whole job of hermeneutics is to



“We can debate laws and policies—but none of those can get us any closer to what the kingdom does. . . .”

parse out the timeless essence from the conditional, temporal packaging. My answer to your hermeneutical question would be this—the essence of the timeless gospel is Calvary. And it’s our job to replicate that. That I take to be the timeless essence. And if you buy that, that the kingdom always looks like Calvary, that has an interesting way of simplifying things. And how we live out that Calvary essence will chance from culture to culture. But that we are called to live out that Calvary essence—I don’t think that does change.

Your book points out that when we say that we want to “take America back for God,” we are saying that there’s a large number of Christian people in our culture, and we want the culture to acknowledge that because we have power. We are not asking, “What is it like to be a Christlike nation?”

I wouldn’t ask what it’s like to be a Christlike nation. I would ask what it means to be Christlike people and leave it at that. It’s a much more fundamental question. It is the most important ques-

tion, and it’s not being asked enough: What does it mean to be a follower of Christ? Not how do I vote as a follower of Christ, or how do I campaign as a follower of Christ, but how do I live as a follower of Christ?

Do you think that part of the problem is that we don’t believe that serving the world will save it—that Jesus didn’t really know what he was talking about?

That is exactly it. When it comes to, for example, getting involved in war and the use of violence, it’s so impractical that we have no intentions of doing it. But we call Jesus the Lord of our lives, we don’t want to say to him, “Jesus, you’re off your rocker.” It’s impious to say that. So we do what Augustine did—we do gymnastics around the passage about loving our enemies. Well, clearly Jesus didn’t mean love our kind of enemies. He didn’t mean Osama bin Laden.

If you look at the context of that passage, Jesus’s whole point was, “This is not like anything you’ve ever heard. You’ve heard it said, an eye for an eye

and a tooth for a tooth—I am going to tell you something very different. And if you love those who love you, what reward is there in that? I’m telling you to love your enemies and to do good to those who persecute you.”

He is talking to people who before too long are going to see their kids get fed to lions. He knew what he was talking about. And it is not impractical. Our rationality would say, if we follow this, then evil will take over—then the world is going to hell in a handbasket.

Here is where you either trust God or you don’t. You either believe in the resurrection or you don’t. I don’t think that a large percentage of the followers of Jesus really believe that God is going to change the world through a Calvary-like moment of life.

But how practical was the cross when you look at it? Until Easter morning it didn’t look very practical at all. Here’s this guy who has all the power in the universe—and what does he do with it—he lets himself be crucified. Why? Because he loves the people who are crucifying him and they need to be saved. □